

Reading Comprehension

What is reading comprehension?

- ◆ Reading comprehension is the construction of meaning through the application of intentional, problem solving processes while interacting with written text. The National Reading Panel (2000) explains that “the content of meaning is influenced by the text and by the reader’s prior knowledge and experience that are brought to bear on it” and that “reading is purposeful and active.”

Why should comprehension be taught?

- ◆ Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading.
- ◆ Adults who qualify for Adult Basic Education classes are often unable to integrate and synthesize information from longer or more complex texts (Kruidenier, 2002).
- ◆ Adults with learning disabilities tend to have lower functional literacy comprehension achievement (Kruidenier, 2002).
- ◆ Although there are limited studies on the reading comprehension of adults, the results of these studies suggest that explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies does result in improved comprehension. This research is supported by the findings of the National Reading Panel (2000), which found that children’s reading comprehension can be improved by instruction in using specific cognitive strategies or in reasoning strategically when encountering barriers to understanding.

Evidence-Based Instructional Practices: ADULTS (Kruidenier, 2002)

- ◆ Assess learners to determine reading comprehension ability and to measure progress in the acquisition of reading comprehension strategies. Also consider secondary issues that may impact reading comprehension, such as cultural and language differences in ESL students; learning disabilities; alphabets and vocabulary knowledge; and fluency in word reading.
- ◆ Provide explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies.
- ◆ Provide instruction in comprehension along with instruction in other components of reading (word analysis, fluency, and vocabulary).
- ◆ Research suggests:
 - Teachers may need to **use more than one measure** of reading comprehension to obtain useful information for diagnosis and program evaluation; **knowledge of comprehension strategies should be assessed and taught**.
 - **Workplace or family literacy programs** may increase learners’ reading comprehension more readily than general literacy programs.
 - Teachers should include **adult-oriented material**.
 - Teachers should **attend to enabling factors**, such as how a classroom is organized or how comfortable adults are in the setting.
 - Teachers should deal briefly but directly with issues of **motivation**, especially **adults’ perceptions** of their reading ability and the importance of reading (self-efficacy).

Evidence-Based Instructional Practices: CHILDREN (NRP, 2000)

- ◆ Provide explicit instruction and practice in the following:
 - **comprehension monitoring:** readers learn to be aware of when they do not understand the text and how to use fix-up strategies.
 - **graphic and semantic organizers:** readers make graphic representations, including story maps, of the material to assist comprehension.
 - **question answering:** readers answer questions posed by the teacher and receive immediate feedback.
 - **question generating:** readers learn to ask themselves questions about various aspects of the text.
 - **story structure:** readers learn to ask and answer who, what, where, when, and why questions about the plot and/or to map out the time line, characters, and events in stories.
 - **summarizing:** readers learn to identify and write the most important ideas that integrate separate ideas or meanings into a coherent whole.
 - **multiple strategy instruction:** students learn to use a combination of strategies appropriate for the reading task.
- ◆ Provide tasks that demand active involvement.
- ◆ Scaffold new learning, gradually withdrawing the amount of assistance offered to the learner.
 - Direct explanation
 - Modeling
 - Guided practice
 - Application
- ◆ Engage learners in cooperative learning, in which readers instruct or interact with each other to learn text comprehension strategies.
- ◆ Encourage students to use comprehension strategies flexibly and in combination.

Sources

Kruidenier, John (2002). *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, Partnership for Reading.

National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching Children to Read: an Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction (Report of the Subgroups)*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute for Child Health and Human Development.

Alphabetics: Phonemic Awareness & Phonics

What is *phonemic awareness* (PA)?

- ♦ *Phonemic awareness* is the ability to distinguish and manipulate the individual *sounds*—phonemes—in spoken language. Although the English alphabet contains only 26 letters, the letters can be used to form 41 phonemes.
- ♦ Phonemic awareness is a subcategory of phonological awareness, which refers to the ability to identify and manipulate the *larger* parts of spoken language, such as words, syllables, and rhymes.

What is *phonics*?

- ♦ *Phonics* refers to the relationship between the *letters* of written language and the *sounds* of spoken language. It is different from phonemic awareness because it involves the letters themselves and how these relate to the sounds of the language.

Why should PA and phonics be taught?

- ♦ Adult non-readers have virtually no phonemic awareness, and adult beginning readers have difficulty applying letter-sound knowledge to figure out new words while reading (Kruidenier, 2002).
- ♦ Research has shown PA and knowledge of letters to be the two best indicators of how well children will read by the end of 1st grade (NRP, 2000).
- ♦ Research has found that instruction in phonics leads to improved word-reading and, to a lesser degree, improved reading comprehension for adults, for at-risk kindergartners and first-graders at all SES levels, and for disabled readers in Grades 2-6 (Kruidenier, 2002; NRP, 2000). The NRP (2000) found that the effect of phonics instruction on text comprehension for the older readers was significantly less than that for younger readers, indicating that other factors (fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies) may need to be assessed and taught as well.
- ♦ Research has found that abilities in PA and phonics in adults and children do improve with instruction (Kruidenier, 2002; NRP, 2000).

Evidence-Based Instructional Practices: ADULTS (Kruidenier, 2002)

- ♦ Assess beginning readers' phonemic awareness, phonics abilities, and sight word knowledge. Since adult beginning readers are generally better at recognizing familiar sight words than children who are learning to read, avoid using sight words adults may know for phonics assessments.
- ♦ Provide adult beginning readers with a significant amount of alphabets instruction, in conjunction with other aspects of reading.
- ♦ Continue to assess PA in beginning readers, even if their overall reading scores are going up. Research suggests that adults with a learning disability in reading may not develop phonemic awareness as they learn to read; thus, attending to PA development may help teachers identify those students who need more in-depth work with PA or who need instruction that bypasses PA.

Evidence-Based Instructional Practices: CHILDREN (NRP, 2000)

- ♦ Explicitly and systematically teach children to manipulate phonemes with letters.
- ♦ Focus instruction on 1-2 types of phoneme manipulation, instead of on multiple types. Segmenting and blending seem to be the most important manipulations to teach.
- ♦ Teach phonemic awareness in small groups. (Research shows no difference in the effectiveness of phonics instruction provided to individuals, small groups, or whole classes.)
- ♦ Monitor PA learning carefully. Students who do not respond to PA instruction may have a reading disability.
- ♦ Use some form of systematic phonics instruction. Teach a carefully selected and useful set of letter-sound relationships, organized into a logical instructional sequence. (It does not seem to matter whether or not the approach asks readers to turn letters into sounds, use analogies, or notice spelling patterns.)
- ♦ Encourage readers to apply their phonics knowledge while reading connected text and writing.
- ♦ Provide instruction in the other essential elements (phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, text comprehension).
- ♦ Begin phonics instruction in kindergarten or 1st grade and continue for about 2 years.
- ♦ Consider motivational issues.

Sources

Kruidenier, John (2002). *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, Partnership for Reading.

National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching Children to Read: an Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction (Report of the Subgroups)*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute for Child Health and Human Development.

What is *vocabulary*?

- *Vocabulary* is the set of words for which we know the meanings.
- *Receptive vocabulary* is the vocabulary we can understand when it is presented to us orally or in text. *Productive vocabulary* is the vocabulary we use in writing or speaking. Sometimes this is referred to as *writing vocabulary* or *speaking vocabulary*.
- *Oral* or *listening vocabulary* refers to words that are used or recognized in speaking or listening. *Reading vocabulary* refers to words that are used or recognized in print. Sight vocabulary is a subset of reading vocabulary and refers to words that do not need to be decoded.

Why should vocabulary be taught?

- ♦ Reading vocabulary is crucial to the comprehension processes of a skilled reader. In the early stages of reading, oral vocabulary plays an important role. As a reader begins to read, words encountered in texts are mapped onto the oral vocabulary the learner brings to the task. Benefits in understanding text by applying letter-sound correspondences to printed material come about only if the target word is in the learner's oral vocabulary. Otherwise, strategies will need to be employed to make sense of new words. In general, the greater the oral and reading vocabularies of the reader, the more likely it is that the reader will be able to read text with understanding.

Evidence-Based Instructional Practices: ADULTS (Kruidenier, 2002)

- ♦ Initial research suggests that teaching vocabulary in a specific setting, such as a family literacy or workplace setting, may be more effective than teaching vocabulary in a more general setting. NRP findings in support of the use of repetitive exposures in rich contexts support using family literacy or workplace contexts for vocabulary instruction.
- ♦ Do not assume that adult students, because they are older and more experienced, have well-developed vocabularies. Adult readers' vocabulary growth may be dependent upon reading ability. Although their life experience may give them an advantage on vocabulary knowledge at lower reading levels, this advantage may disappear at higher reading levels.

Evidence-Based Instructional Practices: CHILDREN (NRP, 2000)

- ♦ Provide opportunities for learners to learn new words in rich contexts.
- ♦ Words that are taught should be appropriate for learners' age and ability level.
- ♦ Teach vocabulary directly in ways that actively engage learners. Introducing words before reading texts has been found to be effective.
- ♦ Expose learners to words through read-alouds, discussion, and independent reading (in material they can read fluently).
- ♦ Provide opportunities for repetition and multiple exposures to new words.
- ♦ Explore computers as a way to teach vocabulary.
- ♦ Use a variety of instructional methods for teaching vocabulary.

Sources

Kruidenier, John (2002). *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, Partnership for Reading.

National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching Children to Read: an Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction (Report of the Subgroups)*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute for Child Health and Human Development.

What is fluency?

Fluency is the ability to read rapidly and accurately, with appropriate rhythm, intonation, and expression. Fluency includes the ability to decode rapidly, grouping words into meaningful units for interpretation. Fluency includes pronunciation, determination of emphasis, and appropriate pauses to make sense of text. Fluency is a means readers use to comprehend.

Why should fluency be taught?

- Readers face two major cognitive demands: decoding (recognizing words) and comprehending. Since cognitive resources to meet these demands are limited, resources expended on word recognition reduce the resources available for comprehension. Skilled readers recognize words with automaticity, freeing resources to group words into meaningful units (phrasing), attend to punctuation, and ultimately gain meaning from text. Poor readers use time and resources to decode; their choppy and inaccurate reading impedes comprehension.
- Fluency is an issue for adult beginning readers, intermediate, and perhaps advanced readers. There are large differences between adults with good and poor reading fluency, and adult beginning readers' fluency is similar to the fluency of children who are beginning readers. (Kruidenier, 2002)
- Fluency may be taught to ABE students, and fluency practice may lead to increases in reading achievement. (Kruidenier, 2002)

Evidence-Based Practices for Instruction: ADULTS (Kruidinier, 2002)

- Assess fluency to determine whether fluency instruction is needed. For lower-level readers, one way to determine fluency is by measuring accuracy of decoding and rate of oral reading.
- Use approaches that include repeated reading of passages of text, words from texts, and other text units. Some examples of repeated reading approaches include:
 - Listening to taped versions of passages
 - Simultaneously reading passages aloud while using typed transcripts
 - Giving students passages that are one grade level above their grade equivalent scores on a test of reading comprehension ability
 - Re-reading a passage while listening until students feel able to read it aloud on their own to the instructor
 - Reading two passages with 90% accuracy (mispronouncing no more than 10% of words in a passage) before moving on the next grade level.
- Use systematic phonics instruction to improve fluency.

Evidence-Based Practices for Instruction: CHILDREN (NRP, 2000)

- Provide opportunities for readers to read passages orally multiple times with guidance and feedback from teachers, peers, or parents. The following practices seem to offer effective repeated reading experiences:
 - Paired reading
 - Shared reading
 - Collaborative oral reading
 - Echo reading
 - Tape-assisted or computer-assisted oral reading

Sources

Kruidenier, John (2002). *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, Partnership for Reading.

National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching Children to Read: an Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction (Report of the Subgroups)*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute for Child Health and Human Development.